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AUTHOR Heiner, Harold G.
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ABSTRACT

The Whatcom Community College District (WCCD) was created by the Washington State legislature in 1967. With no money available to construct a traditional campus and no evidence that there was a sufficient number of potential students in any case, a non-traditional institution was designed, operating out of rented and borrowed classrooms throughout the district. The adminstration was composed of coordinators and program implementors and the faculty was entirely part-time. Underpinning the college's philosophy was a commitment to instructional techniques designed to reach individuals and small groups of students in ways that would best meet individual needs and learning styles. The advantages of the decentralized, noncampus college included its flexibility, the ease with which classes could be relocated, ample resources, and the lack of restrictions. However, as enrollments grew over the next 10 years, many of these advantages disappeared. Students taking more than one class often had to commute several miles between classes, and it became difficult to find enough rented classrooms to accommodate 2,500 people. Specialized facilities such as labs were also difficult to find, and rentals became less cost effective. Twenty years later, the WCCD now owns facilities, offering most classes in three or four major centers. The college employs an equal mix of full- and part-time faculty, has a traditional administrative structure, and occasionally uses the word "campus" to describe itself. The nontraditional instructional approaches of the 1970s no longer dominate, but have simply joined the menu of learning options available to students. However, in spite of these shifts, the college's educational philosophy and commitment to its students has changed very little. (JMC)

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# Then and Now: The Evolution of a Non-Traditional Institution

Harold G. Heiner
President
Whatcom Community College

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# Then and Now: The Evolution of a Non-Traditional Institution

by

Harold G. Heiner

The Whatcom Community College District was created by an act of the Washington State legislature in 1967. At the time, its most apparent purpose seemed to be that of completing the subdivision of the state into community college districts since, originally, it was unclear when a college might be formed or just what would be its role.

Though a Board of Trustees was appointed in 1967, it was not until 1970 that a director was hired and the first courses were offered. The community already contained a four-year college, a vocational-technical institute and other proprietary institutions thus leaving some to wonder and others to seriously question the need for yet another postsecondary institution--especially a college with no facilities and an undocumented community need. It was within this environment that the new college's five-member board of trustees set about "creating" a college.

What the trustees created was one of the nation's first non-campus, non-traditional community colleges. It was an exceptionally innovative way to reach a widely dispersed population with the very limited resources available. Upon examining the relevant historical documents (i.e. statement of philosophy, organizational structure and long-range plans) one gets the impression that this non-traditional institution was created that way because it was the best approach to higher education. In fact, it was probably the best way to accomplish the task at that time, in that environment and with the resources then available. The reality of the time was that no money or support was available to construct a traditional campus and no evidence existed that large numbers of students would show up in one place at one time to take advantage of such a campus. The non-traditional college without a campus was designed as such out of economic necessity by people with immense educational creativity.

Many of the College's early innovations and non-traditional approaches grew out of pragmatic solutions to the problems posed by a total lack of capital construction funds and an apparent sparse student population. It eventually became nationally known as non-traditional because it energetically and creatively served its district without centralized facilities in ways that recognized individual student geographic and economic situations as well as their varying educational needs. What emerged was a college with rented and borrowed classrooms throughout the district; a peculiar administrative structure staffed by coordinators and program implementors; a faculty composed entirely of part-time people and a college philosophy fully committed to instructional techniques designed to reach individuals and small groups of students in ways that would best meet their individual educational needs and differing learning styles. A mobile bookstore, learning contracts, credit for prior learning, mediated instruction, traveling several miles between classes and alternative

approaches of all kinds were pioneered out of necessity and perfected out of commitment.

The early trustees quickly grasped the limitations of the situation and eagerly transformed them into acceptable and unique realities to be savored. Their earliest mandate regarding the manner in which the College would develop its facilities states:

> "We have committed ourselves to a decentralized operation...we do not expect to build a large central facility to which our clientele must come...we expect to borrow suitable facilities when we can and in places where they are convenient to our students. If we can't borrow, we expect to rent. If we can't rent, we expect to lease. If we can't lease, we expect to rebuild existing facilities...we may have central locations for administrative purposes and for certain fixed requirements...but these will be the lesser part of our campus...subcampuses in permanent locations throughout the county are preferable to a central campus even of modest dimensions."

The new College was to be served by the development and use of four types of facilities. Those were a college administrative service center, a number of community study centers, mobile units and a large number of individual rentals. The word "campus" was not in the staff's vocabulary.

There were a number of advantages to this decentralized, rented institution. For example:

1. It was flexible. The College could go where the students were.

2. It was easily relocatable. When a need was filled, the building could be easily vacated and another quickly rented.

3. There were ample resources. Funds for rentals were readily available.

4. There were few restrictions. Rented facilities could be acquired quickly and easily with virtually no restrictions by agencies beyond the local board of trustees.

5. No capital outlay was required. Rental costs are initially much lower than construction.

## Twenty Years Later

It has been nearly 20 years since Whatcom Community College offered its first courses. The College now owns facilities, employs an equal mix of part- and full-time faculty, has a traditional administrative structure and occasionally uses the word "campus" (though we mean it differently) to describe itself. The College also considers itself to be decentralized (the community is our campus), and it remains fully committed to alternative educational approaches and individualized instruc-

tion. It is a much larger institution; offers most instruction through "traditional" methods; has a level of demand well beyond student capacity and is attracting ever increasing numbers of younger students.

To some extent, the College has become a victim of its own success. Even though one of its values is to offer a large measure of its courses on a continuous enrollment, self-paced basis, the reality is that most courses are filled before classes begin and most students proceed under the institutional pace prescribed by the quarter rather than a pace more nearly their own. When a student's individual pace becomes apparent, it is usually that he or she is asking for an extension of the quarter rather than finishing early to allow a new student to begin. While the institution's intention was to march to a less traditional drummer, the vast majority of students want a classroom envfrohment similar to their previous public school experiences.

The original college without a campus was a success. Faculty traveled around the district taking courses to the students, in places convenient to those students, but then an interesting phenomenon began to take place. Those students, few in number, who sought out the College in order to take a single course became the students, great in number, who were trying to enroll for full-time course loads. By 1978, the College had an enrollment of nearly 2,500 people consisting of a great many who would dash for their cars between classes in order to race across town or to another community for their next class. At that point, the need to create major centers in fewer locations for the convenience of both students and faculty became apparent. The creation of major centers only made the College more visible and accessible to students hoping to complete programs or degrees and, again, enrollment increased dramatically.

Certain centers became larger than others simply as the result of demand at those locations. While the College does currently have one center which stands out in size and location, it is still only part of the total "campus." It is significant as a highly efficient teaching and administrative center and, while the students refer to it as "the campus," it lacks such campus amenities as athletic fields, cafeteria, theater, and all except the most basic rudiments of a student activities center.

By 1980, ten years after offering its first courses as a rented, decentralized, non-campus institution, the view toward leased and rented facilities began to change. Many of the advantages of that early approach to facilities no longer effectively served student needs. The decentralized rented/leased operation began demonstrating a number of disadvantages. For example:

1. <u>It became inconvenient</u>. Students taking more than one class had to commute between classes--sometimes several miles.

2. <u>It was difficult to manage</u>. At about 800 FTE, it becomes very difficult to rent or borrow enough temporary classrooms, especially considering that many change quarter after quarter.

3. Facility choices were severely limited. Specialized facilities such as labs are only available when not being used by high schools and usually require using that school's teacher.

4. It lacks atmosphere. Full-time (particularly younger) students like a "real college" atmosphere. Rented, poorly kept facilities with students always on the move don't provide that ambiance.

5. Landlord interest is low. The landlords are guaranteed regular payments for the life of the lease. Generally, they show up to sign a lease and will do almost no maintenance and even fewer improvements until time to sign a new lease.

6. It is more expensive in the long run. If the College plans to stay in a facility for more than five years, the facility should probably be purchased rather than rented. This College has paid the purchase value of some facilities at least twice and still does not own them.

7. These days, there are rules, rules and more rules. Acquiring a lease, lease/purchase or lease/option requires the involvement of multiple state agencies.

8. It is slow. Changing leased facilities now requires a minimum of six months; typically one year and sometimes up to three years.

9. Funds are tight. Rental budgets in the Washington community college system allow for some inflation on existing facilities, but money for new leases is nearly nonexistent.

Whatcom Community College has evolved from service in a great many classroom locations to operating primarily out of three or four major centers. That change has resulted directly from student requirements and expectations over the years. Students discovered that the non-traditional college was not only effective in serving older, returning students with family responsibilities, but that it was also a viable option for younger, more traditional students. The need for fewer, major centers was a logical and necessary response to the increased numbers of students, their program expectations and changing community perceptions of the College. Even though the College was created without a strong documented community need, it has been molded over the years according to the needs of the community. It is now truly theirs.

The College's educational philosophy has changed very little over its 20 years of existence. At least as many non-traditional students are served today with just as many non-traditional educational practices as before. It just doesn't seem so since the more traditional (18-to-22-year-old) students have increased in far greater numbers, and what was non-traditional 20 years ago is frequently common practice now. The faculty and staff have great ownership of Whatcom's wide-ranging instructional approaches and have fully merged them with the more traditional. We sometimes refer to it as "the Whatcom Way." Those "non-traditional" instructional approaches of the '70's have simply joined the menu of the numerous learning options available at Whatcom today.

When one closely compares Whatcom to other Washington community colleges there are probably relatively few real differences in how students are valued and approached. The campus-based institutions are typically doing a great deal of community outreach while our non-campus (outreach) institution is becoming more centralized. I suspect that most of our community colleges pride themselves on their concern for individualizing education just as much as does Whatcom. Perhaps, then, the primary benefit of starting out as a non-traditional institution is that it gave the College a unique definition. That unique definition, in turn, is the College's tie to its roots. It reminds us that we were founded to be unique, non-traditional and student centered and will likely guide us to always try a little harder to hold on to those values.

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